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Guidelines for Storefronts of Heritage Buildings

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Foreword

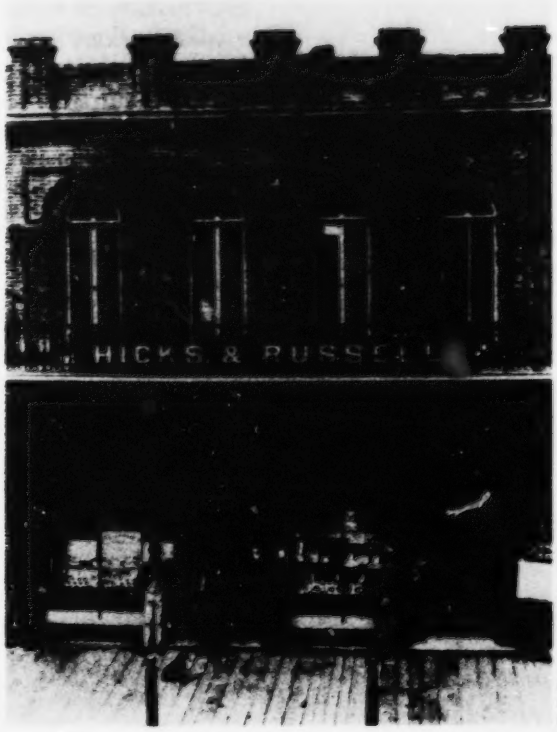
Since its inception in 1977, the British Columbia Heritage Trust has been developing new ways to "support, encourage and facilitate the conservation, maintenance and restoration of heritage property in the Province." One is the Publications Assistance Program which provides aid for production costs of publications dealing with B.C. history. In addition, the Trust has inaugurated this Technical Paper Series.

Although a great deal of general information on heritage subjects is already available, there has been a growing request for concise treatment of specialized subjects within the British Columbia context. Themes are therefore drawn from the fields of history, archaeology, architecture and preservation technology. The British Columbia Heritage Trust invites suggestions for further studies in this series.

Martin Segger
Series Editor

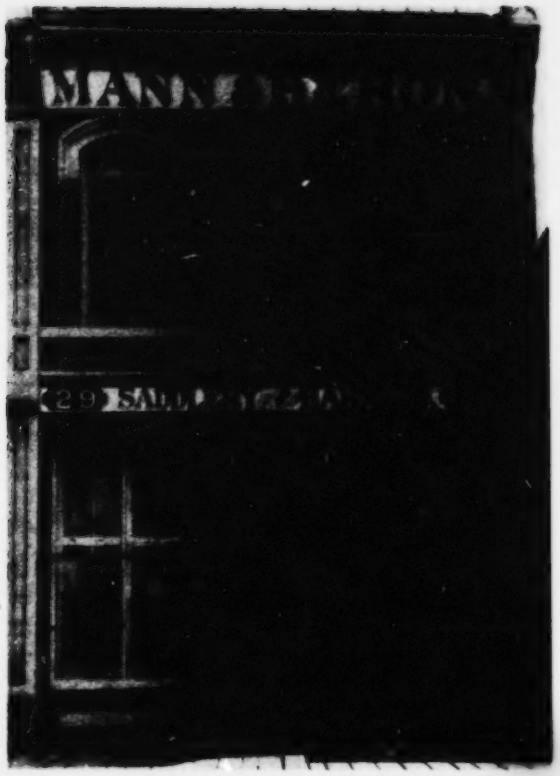
B.C. Provincial Archives photo

Occidental Hotel,
Wharf and Johnson, Victoria, B.C.
The balconied verandah was a practical and decorative feature that would be welcomed on main street today.



B.C. Provincial Archives photo

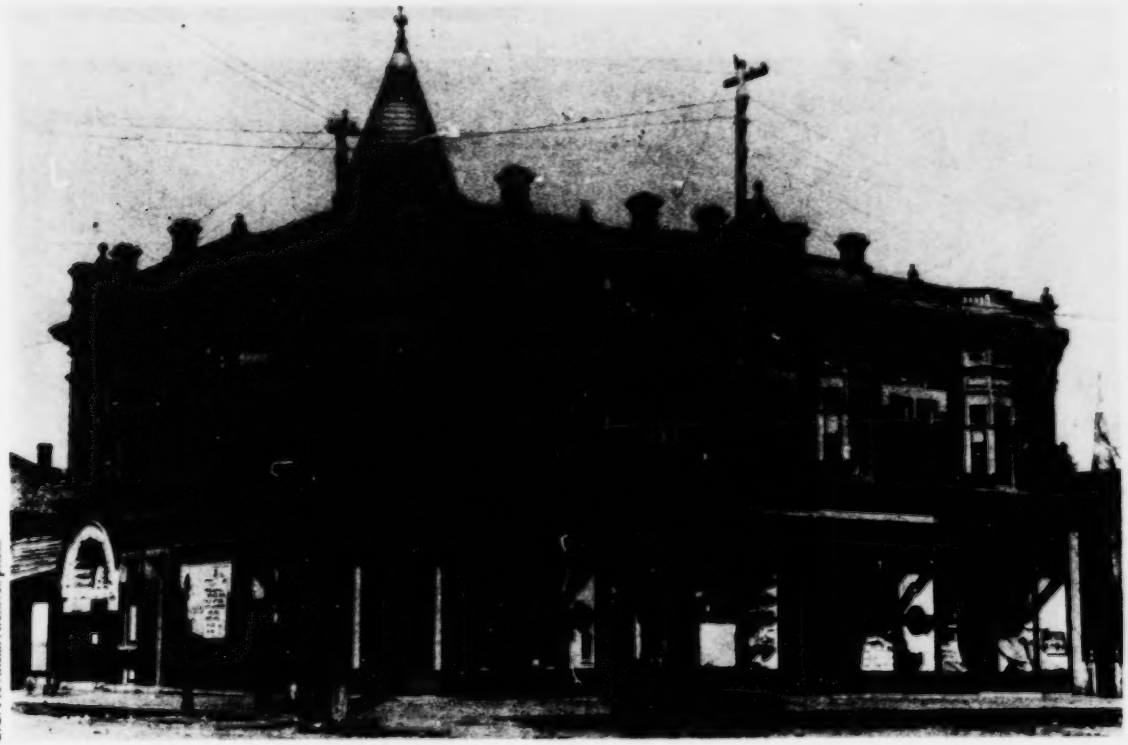
Hicks & Russell,
Victoria, B.C.
The decorative cast-iron balcony was relatively common but rarely exists on surviving Victorian buildings.



B.C. Provincial Archives photo

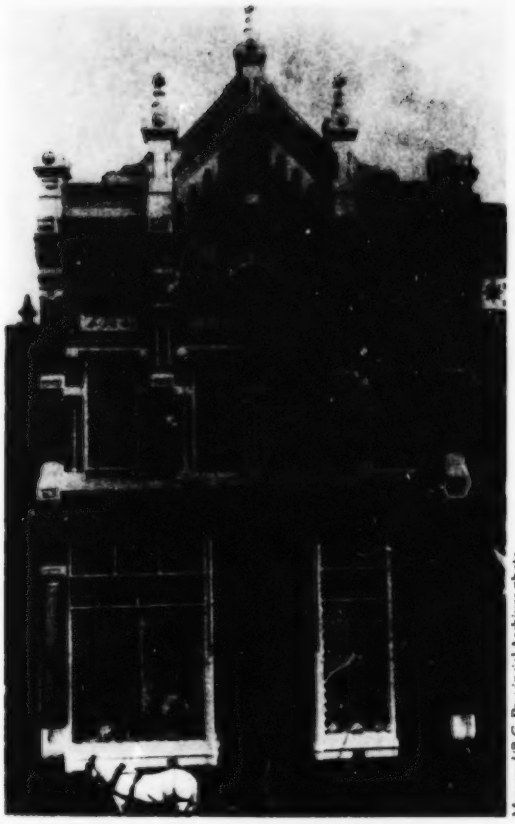
Mann & Heron, 29 Broad Street, east side between View and Yates, Victoria, B.C. Strong, clean lines and effective signage make for good advertising.

E.C. Kellog Drug Store,
Douglas and Yates, Victoria, B.C.
These storefronts still exist, but in radically altered form. The photo shows a subtle, visual connection between the shops and the second storeys — a connection which was lost in renovation.



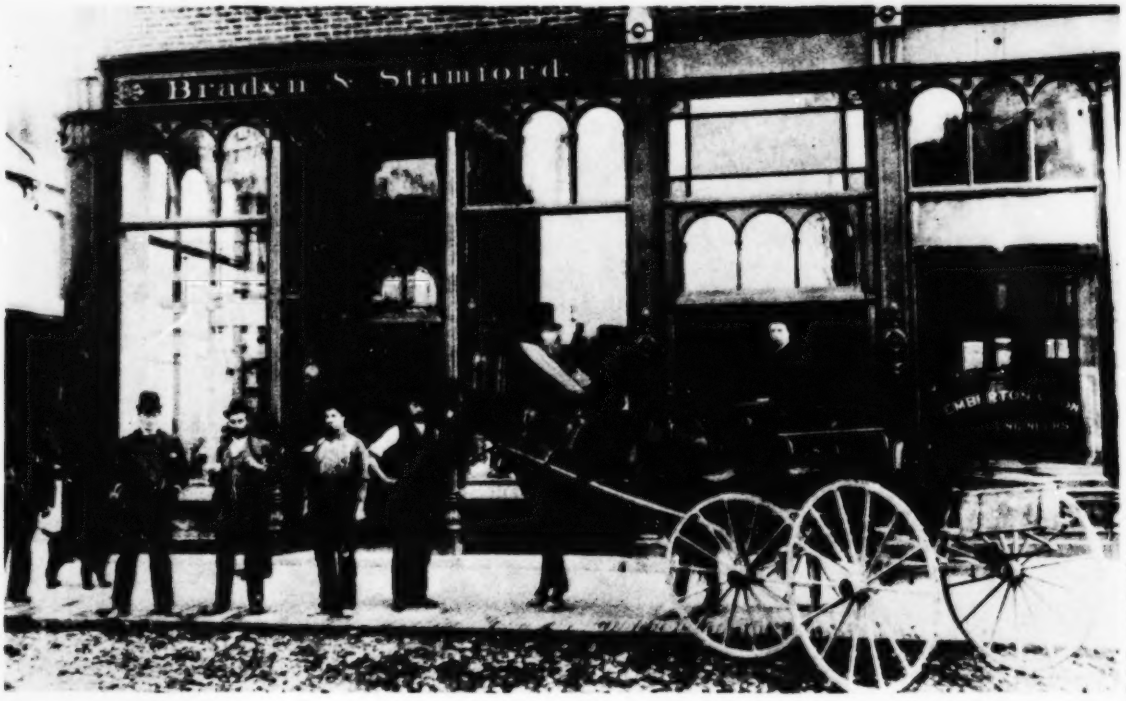
B.C. Provincial Archives photo

White House, H. Young & Co.,
Victoria, B.C., c. 1890
Despite the use of cast iron columns and glass in the first floor, a strong visual connection with the brick upper storeys is maintained with vertical elements.



Maynard/B.C. Provincial Archives photo

Braden & Stamford, Plumber, Steam and Gas Fitter, 47 Fort Street at Broad, Victoria, B.C.
This shop front is a good example of typical Victorian design features: tall windows, a recessed doorway and a variety of ornamentation.

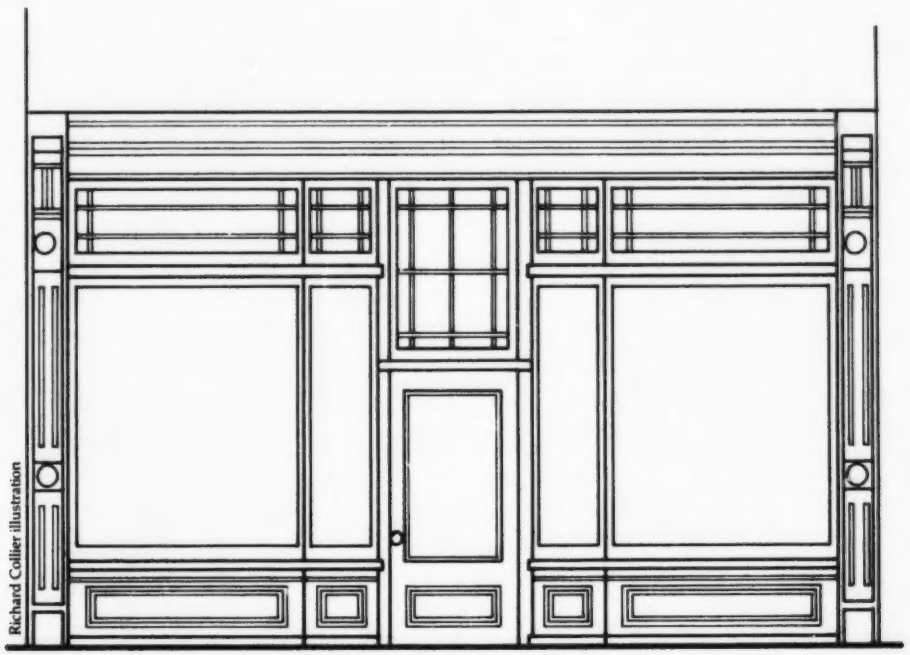


B.C. Provincial Archives photo

Introduction

Many of British Columbia's turn-of-the-century commercial buildings have become renovated agglomerations of various building styles. In combination with the original Victorian facade of the upper storeys, some storefronts have been re-faced in the glossy tile of the '30s, stuccoed over in the '50s, partially covered in horizontal rough cedar siding in the '60s, then plastered over to Spanish colonial in the '70s. With an increasing awareness of our architectural heritage, perhaps it is time to say what is the most appropriate storefront design for a Canadian commercial building of the Victorian era?

Figure 1
A typical storefront design with decorative windows above the tall plate glass display surface, and wood panelling with molding below.



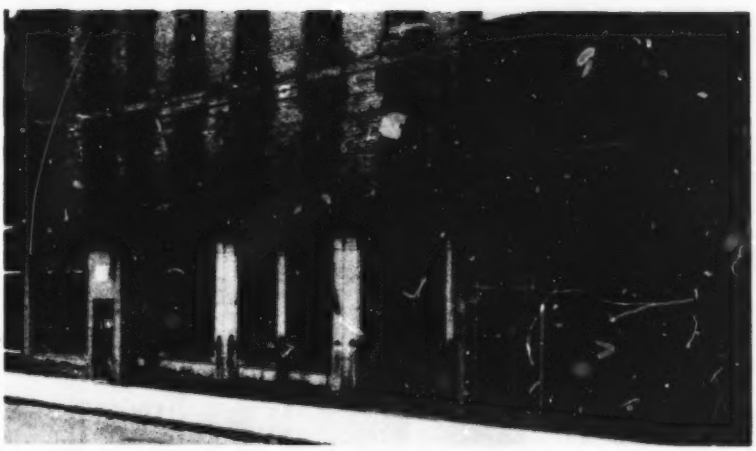
B.C. Provincial Archives photo

Figures 2 and 3
The style of these windows, signs, woodwork and displays suits the age of the buildings and the historic character of the street.

B.C. Provincial Archives photo

Figure 4
The displays and signage are modern but have not been created at the expense of this period storefront reconstruction.

Richard Collier photo

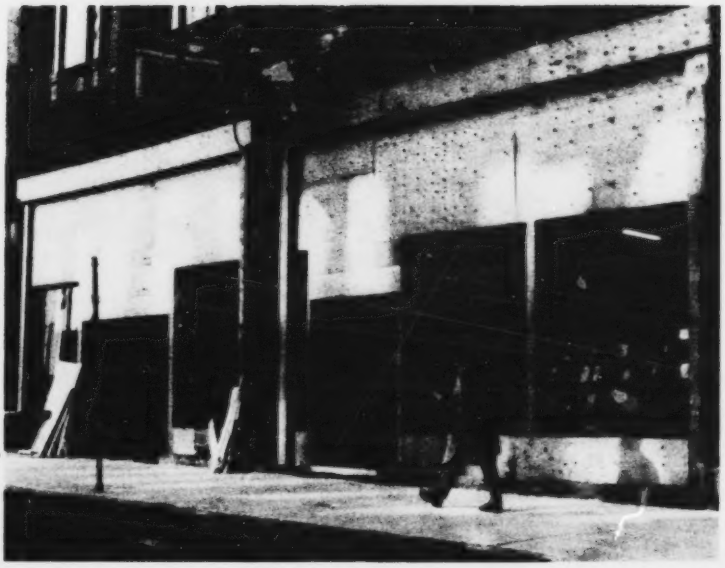


Richard Collier photo

Figure 5
These shabby storefronts need a clean-up, new paint, minor modifications and new awnings. Tacking on cedar siding and aluminum panels, or building arches out of 'old' brick will do nothing positive for the streetscape and building design.

Richard Collier photo

Figure 6



Richard Collier photo

Figure 7

Figures 6 and 7
This vintage storefront **(Figure 6)** with its expanse of glass has recently been converted **(Figure 7)** to a surface similar to any shopping centre, anywhere. The plywood, aluminum and stucco (or will it be rough cedar siding?), plus the awkward shapes of the openings do not suit this stone and brick building of which the storefront is very much a part. Double glazing, an awning, and a well designed display system would have been the better solution, and would likely have cost less money.

Design Criteria

What is most appropriate depends on several other questions:

- How much importance does the owner attach to the original architectural features of the building?
- How much appreciation does the community have for the architectural heritage of the building, group of buildings, mainstreet, or area of town?
- For what goods and services was the storefront originally designed?
- For what is the storefront being used now? That is, what does it help to sell, and what image does it need to project?

Two Typical Examples

Let us look at several store design problems in order to see how important the above questions are. In one typical situation, a new owner of an old drygoods store wants to change the storefront. His building is like those in **Figure 8.** He wants to 'upgrade' and give his appliance business a new image — one that shows modest prosperity and competitive service. From a choice of modern materials, the owner can select combinations of bronze-tone aluminum, rustic cedar shakes, stick-on plastic stone, artificial old brick, cedar ranch-panelling, molded plastic panels, or split-face concrete block. Or, if the owner lives in certain parts of southern Vancouver Island, his commercial neighbours may persuade him to go 'Tudor'.

Perhaps the idea of fixing up or restoring the existing original features has never occurred to him, even though a restoration of the sheet metal cornice and decorative windows, plus some woodwork repairs before painting, might be all that is needed. The cost, appearance, display flexibility, and community appreciation might end up to the owner's advantage. What about that modern, prosperous and competitive image? If the owner hasn't quite achieved it in his restoration, then he can provide it in the window displays and signage. In other words, he can use the products themselves, plus some advertising embellishments to project that image.

Figure 8

Jim Stark illustration

Figure 9

Another common situation involves the perplexed store owner whose 1890 building has been renovated so many times that little evidence exists of the original features. **Figure 9** shows some typical examples. The owner wants to have a storefront that relates visually to the second and third storeys, as well as to the nearby restored 1890 buildings.

He may find information on the original storefront design in photos at a local or regional museum, or through the British Columbia Archives in Victoria. Previous owners may also be able to help. However, even if a good photo is available and reconstruction of the original is feasible, it may not be a good idea to reconstruct exactly because of a change in use of the original space, hence a change in the design requirements.

Before electric lighting, for example, many old storefronts had windows up to 14 feet high to ensure that daylight penetrated the interior space. The possibility of damage to the display goods by the intense sunlight would have been prevented by a fabric awning, or by not displaying perishable goods at all. If a high-window storefront was to be reconstructed for a clothing store, the 14 foot high windows of the original design would be unsuitable because the owner would not be able to display clothing without it fading badly. Often, the ideal design requires a compromise.

From the above examples, we can see that the most appropriate restoration, renovation, and reconstruction work depends on what has been built and modified in the past, what exists at present, and what historical, aesthetic and commercial goals are to be achieved for the future success of the building.

The Original Design

Before discussing the design compromises that often have to be made, we must first look at a building's original design features as shown in **Figure 8.** The wealth of fine detailing is most obvious. This was achieved by a variety of means, including decorative pressed metal cornices and moldings, decorative brickwork, woodwork panelling under the windows, and eleborate windows, doors, and other millwork. Rarely was a large surface left plain; the detailing articulated and framed each building component.

The dominant horizontal and vertical lines are also important design elements. This directional expression ties each storey together, making the multipurpose structure a single commercial unit. For example, in each building illustrated, brick piers extend from the ground to the cornice, with only minor decorative interruption. Vertical lines are further emphasized by the design and location of windows for each storey, the location of doorways, and the alignment of structural elements of the storefront with dominant features of the upper storeys. The horizontal expression of rows of windows, decorative bands, and cornices serves to define each storey and to 'cap' the building. Often these horizontal lines coincide with those of the adjacent buildings, thereby fostering a unified and harmonious streetscape.

The Most Common Renovation Mistakes

For a typical example of what has happened to this finely detailed and ornamented building with expressive horizontal and vertical lines, let us study the design features of some typical renovations in **Figure 9.** The fine detailing of sheet metal cornices, wood panelling, molding, and decorative windows has been stripped off, stuccoed over or hidden by large plastic signs. The windows at storefront level bear no relation in size or proportion to those above. The clear vertical and horizontal lines of each building have been completely lost to the expanse of advertising. Note how typically the hotel sign carries over to the next building, and how the jumble of signs obliterates the individual building's character. Here an old but restorable silk purse has been made into a sow's ear. The confusion resulting from a group of poorly designed renovations, with each building shouting for the customer's attention, will more than likely drive the customer away.

Sympathetic Design and Historical Accuracy

Let us consider **Figure 10** as a good starting point or basis for putting this small streetscape back together again. Although the renovated storefronts here are not historically accurate, their design is sympathetic to the rest of the building and to the building's historical context. For example, a compromise has been made in placing the signs 'Store' and 'West Hotel' in place of the original high windows. The owner may need advertising space, but at least it doesn't take over the whole building. Note also that the bank in **Figure 10** has been renovated so that the strong verticals of the original are retained.

Certainly in many cases, an accurate reconstruction of the original design would be preferable from a historical point of view, but buildings must serve the present as well as reflect the past.

Figure 10

Jim Stark illustration

Research Prior to Design

Following are some steps to take in designing storefront renovations and reconstructions.

- **Investigate the history of the building** by gathering information and photos from the local museum and archives, former owners or the British Columbia Archives.
- **Investigate the building's original features** by doing some probing of the structure, cladding and surfaces. Look to see what has been covered over, and where changes have been made.

The single most important change to a storefront could be a reinstallation of the old awning that protected the displayed goods from the sunlight, kept rain off the pedestrians and provided a good surface for advertising. An attractive awning can turn pedestrians into window shoppers and buyers. Many Victorian buildings had a more permanent equivalent of the awning with their verandahs. If research photos show such a feature, a reconstructed verandah would be a welcome addition to the street.

Figure 10

- **Examine the present state of the building** and analyze its line, form and materials. In some instances, looking at a photo or a slide of the building is easier than standing out on the street.
- **Determine your advertising and display requirements.** How do your customers see what you have for sale, and how do you best communicate the nature of your business?
- **Combine your knowledge of the building's history, present condition and commercial requirements** to design the most appropriate and attractive storefront. Some advice from an architect who is familiar with restoration design, may be helpful at any of these stages.

Design Suggestions

The following suggestions may also help in your design process:

- **original features.** Try to accommodate as many of the building's original features into your renovation plans as possible.
- **alterations.** Alter the original in a way that is reversible, i.e., don't make major changes to the original design that you may regret in the future.
- **use of materials.** Use building materials that are similar in colour, texture and dimensions to the original. Avoid expanses of modern materials, such as plastic or aluminum, that will detract from the original features.
- **advertising.** Make the building and the window displays do as much advertising as possible. Reduce the signage so that the building is the most important element.
- **ornamentation.** The research information on the original building should help to present the storefront as it once was. Avoid the 'heritage look' wherein a plain but interesting building is converted to an ornamented Tudor or Victorian showpiece.

James R. Chabot
Provincial Secretary and Minister
of Government Service